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AUTHOR Burns, Gary
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ABSTRACT

For a researcher with a serious interest in studying popular culture, the collective negligence of the entertainment industries, the scholarly community, and the government is a given, but some action to preserve American mass media artifacts can be undertaken. Contrary to the myth of unlimited access to information, certain regions of the public realm keep getting harder and harder to find. Original negatives no longer exist for many classic movies and TV shows, and the budgets of film and television archives are grossly inadequate to the task of preservation. It is not difficult to see that many of the thousands of music videos being produced today will soon be lost without a serious effort at collection and preservation. The Bowling Green State Popular Culture Center is preserving many popular music artifacts, but back issues of music industry trade journals and music magazines are fast disappearing, and it is currently impractical to plan a research project around such materials. The rerelease of old records is flourishing, however, proably because there seems to be a market for these musical "dinosaur bones." If trade journals and old music magazines were reprinted, there might be a market for those also. Since 1969, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive has videotaped the nightly newscasts of the three major TV networks--an example of the contribution the academic community can make to posterity. The Library of Congress should collect all issues of music tabloids, and send them along to Bowling Green if they find it impossible to keep them. (Contains 21 notes.) (NKA)

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Where Have All the Records Gone, or When Will We Ever Learn?

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Gary Burns, Associate Professor
Department of Communication Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115
815-753-7108

American Culture Association, New Orleans, April 8, 1993

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Where Have All the Records Gone, or

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Here's a memo I received recently from Interlibrary Loan: "Your Interlibrary Loan Request is being returned unfilled for the following reason(s) . . . . No library able to send." My request had been for a 1968 article from Fusion, a rock music magazine. "No library able to send" is something I'm told often, along with the even more drastic "Unable to locate supplier."

From 1968 to 1993 is not such a long time, and yet I've found it very difficult to track down records from the late '60s and early '70s. By "records," I mean both sound recordings and historical documents. Logically speaking, these materials should be readily available. They were produced in large quantity and sold at a low price. Rock music is a subject that many people were--and still are--passionately interested in. There's a market for historical recordings, and for historical information about the recordings.

And yet the nitty gritty historical details are mostly inaccessible. To a person with my research interests, that's a major problem. But it's more than just an annoyance for one person with esoteric interests. It's also part of a larger tragedy of collective negligence by the entertainment industries, the scholarly community, and the government. In my paper today, I'm going to do two things: First, I'm going to summarize the problem as I've come to understand it. Second, I'm going to propose some actions we can take as individuals, and as an association, to

improve preservation of, and access to, our popular cultural heritage.

I. The Problem

We live in the so-called Electronic Age; the Information Age; the age of mechanical reproduction of works of art. It's an age of utopian corporate dreams of "media convergence" and an "electronic superhighway" offering 500 TV channels and other delights. Just imagine--you'll soon be able to see or hear anything you want, whenever you want it.

Well, not quite. Contrary to the myth of unlimited access to information, certain regions of the public realm keep getting harder and harder to find. Some have disappeared entirely.

I want to talk mainly about rock music, but first I must say a word about film and television. According to the American Film Institute, "of the 21,000 films made in America before 1951, only half survive."[1] "For the silent period (roughly 1893 to 1930), the ratio of lost films may climb to 75 percent or higher."[2] Among the films lost are many by famous stars and directors, including D.W. Griffith, Greta Garbo, W.C. Fields, and Laurel and Hardy.[3] Original negatives no longer exist for some classic films, including Citizen Kane and Casablanca.[4] "Virtually every color film made between 1950 and 1975" is gradually turning pink.[5] "The average black-and-white nitrate feature film [costs] $15,000 or $150 a minute to [save by transferring] to safety stock. The average cost of saving a color film can be as high as $50,000 to

$100,000. Saving epics such as Lawrence of Arabia or Spartacus can be done only by studios willing and able to invest $500,000 or more."[6] The budgets of film and television archives are grossly inadequate to the task of preservation. As of 1991, the preservation budget of the George Eastman House archives was $150,000 a year. At that rate, it would take 150 years to preserve the archives' entire holdings.[7] At the Museum of Modern Art, "because the collection is growing by nearly 500 films a year, the goal of preserving the entire collection keeps slipping further away."[8]

Safety stock, sometimes touted as "stable for 400 years,"[9] is actually subject to a problem called "the vinegar syndrome"--under adverse conditions the film decomposes into acetic acid. The same thing happens to magnetic sound recordings on acetate.[10]

Videotape reportedly lasts only 25 to 30 years.[11] At that rate, the original tapes of All in the Family could perish as early as 1996. Actually, the three pilot episodes of that series are lost anyway. So are most episodes of The Tonight Show from the '50s and '60s and the first Super Bowl.[12] Footage of Hubert Humphrey's acceptance speech at the 1968 Democratic convention is damaged and unusable.[13]

Why are so many films and TV shows missing? Early films were shot on nitrate stock, which decomposes to a powder and sometimes catches fire or explodes. Many films disappeared, and are still disappearing, that way. Others were deliberately destroyed for reasons of safety, or to recover a few cents' worth of silver from

the emulsion, or to clear off shelves, or because nobody saw any economic or moral reason to keep an old film. Many films were simply misplaced. Some turn up from time to time, discovered like dinosaur bones.

In the case of TV, much of it was not recorded in the first place. Some was recorded on film and has been subject to the same quirks of fate as feature films have been. Some TV has been recorded on videotape and has been subject to erasure, in addition to the other dangers already mentioned. Furthermore, videotape has come in dozens of formats, many of which are now obsolete. This means that not only the tape must be preserved, but also the equipment to play it on.

Preservation is one problem. Access is another. I'd like to look at some episodes of Where the Action Is, Dick Clark's music show from the '60s. The Museum of Television and Radio has only one episode. Clark recently told Goldmine magazine he has no plans to rerelease the series on videocassette.[14] It's probably available if you know where to look--but I don't. I could probably track it down if I had a burning desire--but I don't. In a practical sense, the show is inaccessible. I can't go to the library and check it out. It's not lost, as far as I know. It'll probably turn up someday, but we can't be sure of that. In the meantime, the fewer the copies that exist, the more likely the show is to become extinct through some unforeseeable calamity.

There's a lesson in the tragedy of vanishing films, but we didn't learn it in time for television. For the most part, we

still haven't learned it. I venture to predict that 20 years from now, many of the thousands of music videos made in the '80s and '90s will be lost or inaccessible. It's hard enough now to find titles from only a few years ago. Who's collecting and preserving this stuff? Who's keeping track of where it all is? Who thinks it has more than ephemeral value--economic or otherwise?

I mention music video in order to shift my discussion from TV and film to popular music. Let me do this with a specific example. Since 1987, I've been researching Boston rock bands from the late '60s. To my surprise, I've found evidence that a band called the Beacon Street Union made a music video in 1968. Their record label, MGM, was apparently quite interested in film clips as a promotional tool.[15] I interviewed the lead singer of the Beacon Street Union. He remembers the clip, but only vaguely.

Who cares? Not the Museum of Modern Art. Not MTV. Not even the lead singer of the Beacon Street Union. But people interested in the history of music video might care, even though they have no other interest in the Boston Sound of 1968. So why has no historian of music video stumbled upon the Beacon Street Union before?

I think there's a simple explanation--it's impractical to do research in music industry trade journals. I've learned this the hard way, and in the process I've come to see record collecting and popular music librarianship as very similar to film preservation--they're noble activities, and they're in a state of crisis.

Fortunately, records don't decompose like films.[16] Records are made in the thousands or millions of copies. These copies are scattered across the country and the world in the hands of fans and collectors who understand the value of what they own. So records usually don't suffer extinctions, or at least not in the same way as films. Master tapes often receive shabby treatment from record companies, as we're learning now because of CD reissues. But at least there's a lot of vinyl to go around.

Still, the problem of access is severe. I set out to buy, or at least listen to, every record that was part of the so-called "Boston Sound." This was a brief and ill-fated movement centered around several Boston rock bands in 1968.[17] The label "Boston Sound" became a liability within a few months. The last surviving band made their last record in 1971. Most of the others had quit by 1969.

I didn't expect this movement to have much scope or history. I didn't expect it to be hard to research. But, then, I hadn't read the trade journals either. As it turned out, I was wrong in both my assumptions.

I bought all the records I could find, mostly through Goldmine. I think almost everything shows up eventually in Goldmine ads. There are three problems with this: You may have to wait a long time. You may have to pay a lot. And there's always the possibility that the record won't ever turn up. I've been scouring the ads pretty thoroughly for six years, and there are still some records I've never seen advertised.

Some of these phantom records are in the collection at Bowling Green. I went there, listened to them, and got a lot of information from labels, sleeves, album covers, and inserts. I went to Boston and spent several hours with local expert Erik Lindgren, who told me a lot I didn't know and generously made me copies of many records I hadn't heard.

Nevertheless, I still haven't heard everything. For example, a band named the Cloud supposedly released one single. I've heard about it, but I've never seen it or heard it. When all is said and done, I can't be certain that it exists.

Assuming that it does exist, how many copies are there? Where are they? What condition are they in? How can an interested researcher see and hear the record? How will an interested researcher 20 years from now be able to do so?

These are questions I could ask about dozens of records I'm interested in. Every pop music researcher probably has a similar want list of records never heard, never seen, and possibly nonexistent. It's fun to pursue this stuff, but we shouldn't let our enjoyment and successes blind us to the underlying tragedy of a historical record that hasn't been properly respected and preserved.

To get back to the trade journals, the reason I hadn't read them is because they, too, are disappearing. I started with Billboard. A lot of libraries carry it, but many that should don't. If you want a complete run of issues from 1968, in hard copy, without pages missing, good luck. I assume the situation is

even worse for earlier years. Billboard is the most important trade journal of a major American industry. You'd never know it from its status at most libraries.

Of course, if you really want to know about the industry in 1968, you also have to look at the other major trade journals--Cash Box and Record World. They carried a lot of news that Billboard didn't. For example, I find them much more useful than Billboard for information about 45s.

Cash Box and Record World are practically impossible to find. I can't fathom why research libraries wouldn't have subscribed to these 25 years ago, but practically none did. Recently I looked at Cash Box at the New York Public Library. It's on microfilm. Months of issues are missing. Again, I begin to wonder whether a complete run of Cash Box and Record World exists anywhere, and how a researcher could get access to it.

Variety is a bit more accessible, but only on microfilm. Many libraries have gotten rid of their bound volumes. I can only speculate about the availability of minor trade journals, tip sheets, foreign trade journals, and the like--but I certainly don't trip over them at the libraries I visit.

Consumer magazines are another problem. In many cases they contain absolutely essential information, but they're inaccessible and in fact their existence may not even be well documented. Rolling Stone is well known and is even indexed[18]--but try finding an old issue in hard copy. Lesser known rock music magazines are unfortunately "out of scope" at most research libraries.[19]

I return to Fusion as an example. It was a well known, nationally distributed, good magazine. It grew out of New England Scene, which grew out of New England Teen Scene. All three are indispensable sources on Boston rock, and they all seem to have vanished. It's hard to believe that some issues of Fusion don't exist anywhere in the interlibrary loan network, but that seems to be the case. The same is true for Go, a fairly well known magazine in its day. For anyone who wants to look at it today, Go is gone.

II. Some Solutions

Since I've complained so much, I want to cite some positive examples as well as suggest some further correctives.

Access to old recordings is improving in some respects. Bowling Green is leading the way in collecting rock records and listing them in OCLC--and that's only a small part of what they do. The Archive of Contemporary Music, in New York, is reportedly collecting just about everything that's being released now.[20] What a great idea--about 100 years overdue, but better late than never.

The existence of Goldmine and similar publications is a good sign. It's now easy to buy familiar records and at least conceivable to buy obscure ones.

Greg Shaw, Erik Lindgren, and others perform a great service by rereleasing old records. This is a labor of love, but oddly enough there also seems to be a market for these musical dinosaur bones.

Shaw and Lindgren, along with others like David Ginsburg, Frank Hoffmann, Lee Cooper, Bill Schurk, Peter Kanze, and Tim Brooks, are also involved in collecting, indexing, and annotating music periodicals. If it weren't for their efforts, the situation would be infinitely worse than it is.

Let me suggest as a next step that we embark on an ambitious publishing program. The trade journals should be reprinted, along with Fusion, Go, New England Teen Scene, and every other scuzzy, forgotten music rag. There might actually be a good market for this material, but we should print it in any case. We should also reprint the Schwann Catalog, the One Spot New Release Reporter, Peter Kanze's Rock Index, the Catalogue of Copyright Entries for musical compositions, local record surveys, and various categories of sheet music.

Since 1969, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive has videotaped the nightly newscasts of the three major TV networks. As far as I know, they did this without permission. CBS even objected in the '70s, but Vanderbilt kept taping. This is an example of the great contribution the academic community can make to posterity. In 1969, it would have been very easy to say: Who needs yesterday's TV news? What if CBS sues us? Don't the networks keep this material themselves? Isn't it inappropriate for a university to become involved in something like this? Isn't it "out of scope"?

In 1993, it's clear that Vanderbilt did the right thing. Even the networks agree. If not for Vanderbilt, many of those newscasts

would be lost. I say let's try to follow Vanderbilt's example. There's a lot besides newscasts that we should be recording, on both TV and radio. For example, it's good that we can buy old records, but what we can't hear at any price is a certain record played by a certain disc jockey on a certain radio station in 1968. It would be nice if some university had been recording airchecks all these years, but that's not the case. Day by day, most of the output of radio and TV vanishes into thin ether.

I'd also like to see the government take a lesson from itself about copyright. In the early days of film, producers had to submit paper prints in order to register films at the Copyright Office. That's a good thing--the films themselves have long since disintegrated, but new film prints have been struck from the paper copies. The paper print requirement must have seemed idiotic and annoying to producers. It was dropped after a few years, and that's one of the reasons so many films are lost. If only we'd kept that silly requirement.

That brings me back to my opening point. An article from Fusion is unavailable from interlibrary loan. Fusion was copyrighted and published. Isn't it owned by the Library of Congress? Apparently not--and the reasons for this particular type of extinction of popular culture materials are examined in articles by Lee Cooper and Rebecca Sturm Kelm.[21] They both make some good recommendations, which apparently haven't been followed.

Let me add one suggestion of my own. The Library of Congress should own every issue of Fusion. It's the equivalent of a paper

print of a film. The Library should be the owner of last resort, as well as the lender of last resort.

The picture painted by Cooper and Kelm is quite different. It suggests that the Library does not avidly collect popular culture materials and in fact discards tabloids obtained from the Copyright Office (quite possibly the same fate met by Fusion). My suggestion is this--rather than destroy those tabloids, send them to Bowling Green.

It's too late to retrieve 1968 magazines from the landfill, but let's at least try to save their 1993 counterparts. And in the meantime let's try to locate and reissue those magazines and records we should have collected and preserved in 1968. And 1954. And 1992. And 1903. And . . . .

Notes

[1] American Film Institute fundraising postcard, 1989. After I finished writing this essay, I came upon what appears to be the definitive work on film preservation: Anthony Slide, Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992). Consult Slide for a comprehensive discussion of problems and opportunities in film and television preservation.

[2] Frank Thompson, "Fade Out," American Film, August 1991, 34-39, 46, quote on 36.

[3] Ibid., 36.

[4] Ibid., 46.

[5] Jan-Christopher Horak, quoted in ibid., 37.

[6] "AFI Calendar," American Film, July 1991, 58-59, quote on 58.

[7] Thompson, "Fade Out," 36.

[8] Robert W. Butler, "Aging Screen Classics Face Their Own Drama," Kansas City Star, November 18, 1984, 1F, 6F, quote on 1F.

[9] Ibid., 1F.

[10] Pat Troise, "The Vinegar Syndrome," American Film, July 1991, 12.

[11] Susan Dalton, quoted in Thompson, "Fade Out," 38.

[12] "AFI Calendar," 58.

[13] C-SPAN, July 11, 1992.

[14] Dick Clark, answer to question submitted by reader John Ziolkowski, "The Runners Up Are . . .", Goldmine, January 8, 1993,

9. Clark does suggest that Where the Action Is will eventually be rerun on cable.

[15] "'Music Module' & Cowsills Spark MGM Distrib Meeting in Bermuda," Cash Box, January 20, 1968, 8; "MGM Push on Beacon St. Union," Billboard, February 10, 1968, 6; "MGM Using Videotape as 'Auditioners,'" Billboard, February 17, 1968, 1, 12; and "Charlatan Inks MGM to 26 Artist-Promoting TV Films," Billboard, June 8, 1968, 3.

[16] For a summary of the chemical composition and stability of various sound recording media, see Gilles St. Laurent, "The Preservation of Recorded Sound Materials," ARSC Journal 23 (Fall 1992): 144-156. ARSC is the Association for Recorded Sound Collections.

[17] My findings to date are presented in "Bosstown: Another Look at the 'Boston Sound' of 1968," Goldmine, June 26, 1992, 16-34; "The Bosstown Sound," conference paper, American Culture Association, New Orleans, 1988, ERIC ED 292 153; and "Back to Bosstown," conference paper, American Culture Association, San Antonio, 1991, ERIC ED 331 107. See also Robert Somma, "The Boston Sound Revisited," Fusion, September 5, 1969, 6-9 (if you can get it through interlibrary loan!); and Alan Lorber, "Something Called the 'Boston Sound'--by Its Creator," Goldmine, June 26, 1992, 36-40.

[18] Jeffrey Gatten, comp., The Rolling Stone Index: Twenty-Five Years of Popular Culture 1967-1991 (Ann Arbor, MI: Popular Culture, Ink., 1993).

[19] "Scope" is very much in the eye of the beholder. On one occasion, my university library even ruled that a film journal index I had asked the Library to subscribe to was "out of scope" because the journals that were indexed were not owned by the Library--which was exactly why I needed the index. It was as if a whole corpus of academic literature was rendered invisible, and in practical terms nonexistent, by the bureaucratic decree "out of scope."

[20] See Richard Skelly, "'Send Two Copies of Each, Please,'" Goldmine, April 3, 1992, 120, 126. The address of the Archive of Contemporary Music is 132 Crosby St., 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10012.

[21] B. Lee Cooper, "Information Services, Popular Culture, and the Librarian: Promoting a Contemporary Learning Perspective," Drexel Library Quarterly 16, no. 3 (July 1980): 24-42; and Rebecca Sturm Kelm, "The Lack of Access to Back Issues of the Weekly Tabloids: Does It Matter?", Journal of Popular Culture 23, no. 4 (Spring 1990): 45-50.